

Water-damaged buildings may harbor mold

The Alabama Department of Public Health urges the public to take precautionary measures to avoid indoor air quality problems as they repair their storm-damaged homes and buildings following Hurricane Katrina. The recent flooding creates opportunity for molds to grow.

"Molds are mainly a health hazard to that part of the population that is allergic to them, " said Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer. "Proper clean-up of molds decreases the amount available to cause symptoms."

Most molds do not cause infections, but some molds are a health risk to people with immune problems such as HIV infection, cancer patients taking chemotherapy and people who have received organ transplants.

To protect against health risks associated with mold:

- Remove standing water from your home, office or business.
 - Remove wet materials such as carpets, pads, insulation, wallboard, pillows and mattresses. If mold growth has already occurred, carefully remove or clean the moldy material.
 - Use personal protective equipment when cleaning or removing mold. These are gloves, goggles and an N-95 particle respirator (found at most hardware stores). This type of respirator may resemble a paper dust mask with a nozzle on the front. Other respirators are made primarily of plastic or rubber and have a removable cartridge that traps most of the mold spores from entering.
 - Do not use a respirator if you have heart disease or chronic lung disease such as asthma or emphysema. While cleaning up, take breaks in a well-ventilated area. Individuals with known mold allergies or asthma should not clean or remove moldy materials.
 - Do not mix bleach with anything except water. Mixing bleach with other liquids could produce hazardous gases from a chemical reaction. Read and follow label instructions carefully. Open windows and doors to provide plenty of fresh air.

Proper cleanup needs to be done to remove the musty, earthy smell from buildings. The first step in cleanup is to remove sources of moisture since remaining moisture will create the humidity causing more mold to grow. Fix any leaks and remove all water. Using a "wet-dry" shop vacuum (or the vacuum function of a carpet steam cleaner) may be helpful. Use fans and open windows, dehumidifiers, or air conditioning to lower the humidity.

Remove all sheetrock to at least 12 inches above the high water mark. Prevent the growth of mold on hard surfaces such as glass, plastic and metal by cleaning with detergent and water. To remove mold growth from hard surfaces, use commercial products, soap and water or a bleach solution of 1 cup of bleach in 1 gallon of water. Use a stiff brush on rough surfaces such as concrete.

For more information, consult the following Web sites:

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/mold/protect.asp>,

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/mold/reenter.asp>,

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/floods/cleanupwater.asp>,

<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/images/moldguide.pdf>.